*Tells the Facts and Names the Names*

$2.50

# CounterPunch

**Special Double Issue War Report** *Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair* VOL. 11, NO. 19/20

## *Our Little Secrets*

### How the Other Half Talks

**By Alexander Cockburn**

First some words from Hillary Clinton:

"I am, you know, adamantly against illegal immigrants ….Clearly, we have to make some tough decisions as a country, and one of them ought to be coming up with a much better entry and exit system so that if we're going to let people in for the work that otherwise would not be done, let's have a system that keeps track of them." [Sen. Clinton said she favored ] "at least a visa ID, some kind of an entry and exit ID. And, you know, perhaps, although I'm not a big fan of it, we might have to move towards an ID system even for citizens."

"People have to stop employing illegal immigrants. ... I mean, come up to Westchester, go to Suffolk and Nassau counties, stand on the street corners in Brooklyn or the Bronx; you're going to see loads of people waiting to get picked up to go do yard work and construction work and domestic work." Like Bill.

You'll be hearing a lot along the same lines from HRC as she flutters her kerchief at the nativists in the long slope downward towards 2008. Will she manage to drag the liberals with her on her crusade against aliens? Probably. On to Hitler's bedtime reading,the US Exclusion Act of 1924, and the Democratic platform of 2008: exclusion, sterilization and euthanasia. Just so long as they don't lay a finger on Choice.

"I remember when friends would excitedly telephone to report that Rush Limbaugh or G. Gordon Liddy had just read one of my syndicated columns over

(**Election** *continued on page 2)*

# Encounters Outside Ft. Sill

## By DAVID SMITH-FERRI

The day before I arrived in Lawton for a 5-day vigil, a US soldier stationed at Ft. Sill, and recently returned from Iraq, killed himself, leaving a young child without a father and a young wife without a husband.

Some of the most poignant encounters I had in Lawton were with young women whose husbands are stationed at Ft. Sill. One woman, who held an 11 month-old child in her arms, said in a fierce rush of words "I saw you here with your signs, and I had to stop. Look at me, I'm trembling. Who do I have to talk to about this? My husband is a soldier at the base, and I'm terrified he's going to be sent to Iraq."

Another woman, again without prompting, poured out her story. "I moved here when my fiancée got called up. I changed my whole life to come here, but I broke off the engagement when he got his orders to go to Iraq. Every one of my friends whose husband has fought in Iraq has had her marriage fall apart after he returned."

I do not pretend to know the dark twists and turns that led the soldier at Ft. Sill to take his life. I do know that he isn't the first returning soldier to do so.

A US soldier who has spoken courageously and eloquently about this conflict is Camilo Mejia, currently imprisoned in Ft. Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma for refusing to return to fight in Iraq.

Mejia fought in Iraq from April to October, 2003, eventually rising to command an infantry squad. He and his squad were ordered to "soften up" detainees at a center near the Baghdad airport, where they were taught to keep prisoners awake by banging on metal walls with sledgehammers, and to frighten hooded prisoners by pulling the trigger of a gun near their head; he witnessed the killing of civilians, and the use of excessive force in battle.

All of this troubled him at the time, but he found it difficult to sort out his thoughts given the contingencies of war. "Being at risk every second of my life made it very hard to put into perspective how I felt about the war and about being in the military. There was always a sense of emptiness in what we were doing, a certain spiritual pain every time we were attacked, but the tendency was always to find ways to stay alive and put away feelings about the war and its reasons."

In October, 2003, while home on leave, Mejia had the opportunity to reflect seriously on his experiences in Iraq. "I have held a rifle to a man's face, a man on the ground and in front of his mother, children, and wife, and not known why I did it. I have seen a soldier broken down inside because he killed a child…I admit that in Iraq there was the fear of being killed, but there was also the fear of killing innocent people, the fear of putting myself in a position where to survive means to kill; there was the fear of losing my soul in the process of saving my body…I was afraid of waking up one morning to realize my humanity had abandoned me."

Ultimately, he understood that he could not continue to participate in this war, and he refused orders to return to Iraq. "By putting my weapon down," he said, "I chose to reassert myself as a human being." Found guilty of desertion, he was sentenced to the maximum penalty, a year in prison.

Even if you were to make the trip to out-of-the-way Lawton, Oklahoma, which

(**Ft. Sill** *continued on page 4)*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the air. That was before I became a critic of the US invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration, and the neoconservative ideologues who have seized control of the US government."

That's Paul Craig Roberts writing, the same Roberts who used to rampage across the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal back in the days when I had temporary lodgings there as a token radical, alternating with the middle-road Hodding Carter and the neocon Morton Kondracke.

Roberts went on to become Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in Reagan time. These days he's a changed man. He writes scorching columns – some of which we run on our CounterPunch website – about the war in Iraq and the assaults of the Bush administration on the Bill of Rights. He's a good example of the kind of libertarian with whom (a perennial theme of your CounterPunch editors) the left can and should do business on these same big issues.

On November 26 we ran a particularly fierce piece by Roberts, called "Whatever Happened to Conservatives?", whose opening lines I quote above.

"America has blundered into a needless and dangerous war", Roberts went on … Many Christians think that war in the Middle East signals 'end times' and that they are about to be wafted up to heaven. Many patriots think that, finally, America is standing up for itself and demonstrating its righteous might. Conservatives are taking out their Vietnam frustrations on Iraqis … The military-industrial complex is drooling over the profits of war. And neoconservatives are laying the groundwork for Israeli territorial expansion.

"In the ranks of the new conservatives, however, I see and experience much hate. It comes to me in violently worded, ignorant and irrational emails from self-professed conservatives who literally worship George Bush. Even Christians have fallen into idolatry. There appears to be a large number of Americans who are prepared to kill anyone for George Bush."

In Roberts' view, today's fake conservatives, manufacturing a war and trashing civil liberties are the equivalent of Hitler's Brownshirts. "Like Brownshirts, the new conservatives take personally any criticism of their leader and his policies."

The next day Roberts sent out an email reporting an unusually large and favorable response, "Most … were from older people, Vietnam vets, people who until 2004 had voted the Republican ticket since the 1960s, and shell shocked older conservatives who express astonishment that American conservatism has been hijacked by Israeli foreign policy. Many have reached the conclusion that the Republican Party in its celebration of the efficacy of power has become fascist in mentality but lacks any concern with the jobs of citizens, instead favoring corporate globalism—an international form of fascism as contrasted with the national fascism of Germany in the 1930s. They say that the Republican Party and conservative movement have left them by becoming apologists for Israel, war, massive red ink, and a domestic police state. They have moved into the libertarian camp, but tend to view free marketeers as naive apologists for global fascism."

Into the email exchange came Lew Rockwell, editor of a big libertarian website. The Bush regime, Rockwell insisted, is "a form of fascism: the welfare state, economic planning, private ownership, the suppression of civil liberties, militarism, aggressive war, and belligerent nationalism. True it is neocon nationalism (though the Romans had something like it), but it is nationalism nonetheless. And anyone who resists God's imperial republic is a sub-human."

Back came Jude Wanniski, another veteran of the WSJ op ed, now very much his own man, "There's obviously something weird going on here, but I don't think that "fascism" is the appropriate term, because there's no nationalist core. The Administration is simultaneously in favor of nation-liquidating immigration, a curious combination of Invade The World/ Invite The World. Trotskyism, possibly."

Then Abe Lincoln burst into the discussion, and they were off and running on the perennial topic of whether Abe was a fascist. "We need only read a handful of Supreme Court and other cases in the 1860s", wrote Lawrence Stratton, "to find the judiciary's disdain for Lincoln's heavy-handed tactics. My favorite case is Ex Parte Merryman that condemned Lincoln's suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus. Blackstone called Habeas Corpus, 'The Great Writ' and 'bulwark of our constitution'."

"I'm not sure I understand", chimed in Paul Gottfried, "why conservatives are not supposed to criticize Lincoln as a president. He was after all a controversial leader who ruled as a virtual military dictator, in order to quell a Southern secession that was based on what was arguably the right of states to secede. We Americans should have the same moral right to judge Lincoln critically as Frenchmen have to criticize Napoleon or Napoleon III or Germans have to go after Bismarck. In any case it is not clear why American conservatives are required to consider Lincoln a saint who is not open to reevaluation."

Enter stage right, Strauss, spiritual leader of the neo-cons. Tom DiLorenzo: "The Straussians who are so influential in the administration are all champions of nationalism and executive power, first and foremost. That's why Billy Kristol calls them (and himself) 'national greatness conservatives.' Very fascistic. This is also why they are such slavish Lincoln and Churchill idolaters: They use these examples of 'great men' who were not afraid to set aside the Constitution in pursuit of nationalism. In his book Making Patriots AEI Straussian Walter Berns clearly states their imperialistic and nationalistic objectives as essentially saving the world from itself through U.S. military adventurism. One of the themes of the book is that the young need to be brainwashed into joining the military in this crusade because they are supposedly too selfish and interested mostly in living peaceful and pros-

(**OLS** *continued on page 10*)

Editors
Alexander Cockburn
Jeffrey St. Clair

Business
Becky Grant

Design
Deborah Thomas

Counselor
Ben Sonnenberg

Published twice monthly except August, 22 issues a year:
$40 individuals,
$100 institutions/supporters
$30 student/low-income
**CounterPunch**.
All rights reserved.
**CounterPunch**
**PO Box 228**
**Petrolia, CA 95558**
**1-800-840-3683 (phone)**
**counterpunch@counterpunch.org**
**www.counterpunch.org**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## *Pie in the Sky*

# Star Wars Goes Online...Crashes

### By Jeffrey St. Clair

On a chilly July morning on the Alaskan tundra, the first Interceptor missile was lowered into a silo at Fort Greeley. Over the following weeks, five more missiles were planted into their silos, as the Ballistic Missile Defense System, once known as Star Wars, went on line. As part of Bush's accelerated deployment scheme, the Pentagon is set to install a total of 10 missiles in Alaska and 10 more at Ft. Vandenburg Air Base in California in 2004, with dozens more to follow over the next two years. The scheme is so acclerated that the Pentagon admits that they have no idea how the missiles would be launched, who would give the order to launch them and whether they will have even the remotest chance of hitting their target.

During a campaign stop at a Boeing plant in Ridley Park, Pennsylvania, Bush lauded the missile program and chided its critics. "Opponents of missile defense are living in the past," Bush told the Boeing workers and executives. "We're living in the future. We're going to do what's necessary to protect this country. We say to those tyrants who believe they can blackmail America and the free world: You fire; we're going to shoot it down." Boeing, of course, is one of the three main contractors for the Pentagon's missile defense program, the most expensive weapons system in the federal budget.

Bush painted his pet project as a technological and military triumph. But he surely knew better. In fact, he had just been briefed that the multi-billion dollar scheme was plagued with problems from top to bottom. According to the Washington Post, an internal Pentagon report presented to Bush in early August 2004 concluded that the ground based Interceptor rockets now humming in their Alaskan silos will have less than a 20 percent chance of knocking down a nuclear missile carried on a primitive North Korean rocket.

In a separate briefing, General James E. "Hoss" Cartwright, head of the US Strategic Command, the Pentagon wing responsible for nuclear war planning, told Bush that the system doesn't work and that the missile's testers don't know why. He told the president that costs were soaring; yet, little progress was being made in getting the system online in even a primative way. The briefing seems to have made even less of an impression on Bush than the National Intelligence Estimates he received on the deteriorating conditions in Iraq. He refuses to admit the flaws in the technology, the incentive it gives other nations, such as China, Russia,North Korea and Pakistan, to accelerate their nuclear missiles, or justify the staggering costs (more than the entire State Department budget) in a time of soaring budget deficits.

Even more confounding, though the missiles are poised on alert, the Pentagon has yet to develop a set of rules for spelling out who has the authority to launch the Interceptors in case of a missile attack. Such guidelines are needed because the computer software system that is meant to operate the network of Interceptors automatically isn't even close to completion.

***"It's still considered a success...We just don't know why it didn't hit."***

No one knows what it will look like, when it will be ready or if it will work. Moreover, the mysterious X-Band radars which are meant to detect incoming nuclear missiles and feed their speed and location to the guidance system of the Interceptors are not yet in place and won't be for years.

Of course, Rumseld's decision to delay issuing a directive might be prudent, considering the fact that the Interceptors have never proven that they can hit their target in a combat situation.

In testing over the past decade, the Interceptor missile's track record is far from impressive. For starters, the missile has yet to be tested when attached to its rocket booster, meant to power the missile into outer space where it is supposed to track down and destroy incoming nuclear missiles.

In eight flight tests, the Interceptors, launched without boosters, hit their target only five times. Yet in those tests, the Interceptor was travelling at less than half the speed it would need to under operational conditions.

Bush, given his academic record, might consider a 60 percent test score an impressive achievement. But it's a pretty dismal showing for a missile system that has consumed nearly $70 billion, especially when you throw in the fact that, to date, all of the Interceptor tests have been fixed.

For example, the target missiles carried the equivalent of a homing beacon that "lit them up", in the words of one tester, so that the Interceptors could find them in the skies over the Pacific.

The weapons testers also knew when and where the missiles had been launched, as well as their trajectory, speed and path. In other words, they knew where they were going and when they would be there. Hitting the target only 60 percent of the time under these rigged conditions is like flunking the test even after you've stolen the exam.

The Interceptors performance didn't improve over time and the Pentagon testers had little idea about where to locate the source of the problem or how to upgrade the missile's batting average. Instead of going back to the drawing board, the Pentagon, in December 2002, simply declared that the Interceptor was ready for deployment and stopped further testing.

The decision was ridiculed by Senator Carl Levin, one of the few Democrats who have tried to put the brakes on the Missile Defense juggernaut. "The decision to field an as-yet-unproven system has been accompanied by a decision to eliminate or delay the very testing that must be conducted to show whether the system is effective."

Even when the testing demonstrates the failure of a system the Pentagon spins it as a success. A case in point. On June 18, 2003, the Navy launched a SM-3 missile from a Aegis cruiser ship off of Hawai'i at a mock war warhead launched from test range on the island of Kauai. The SM-3 missile is the second layer of the Missile Defense system, designed to collide with intermediate range missiles. The SM-3 missed its target by a wide margin. Another strike out for the Missile Defense team.

That's not how the Pentagon saw it. In an interview the following day, Chris Taylor, the spokesman for the Missile Defense Agency, hailed the failure as a success.

"I wouldn't call it a failure," Taylor said. "Because the intercept was not the primary objective. It's still considered a success, in that we gained engineering data. We just don't know why it didn't hit." CP

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## *Jim Talib's Story*

# A Marine's Time in Iraq

### Interview by Derek Seidman

*Where did you serve in Iraq?*

I was assigned to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, as a Corpsman with a Marine Rifle Company, from February to September of this year. I spent the spring and most of the summer based out of Camp Fallujah, Iraq (called F.O.B. St. Mere under the Army's control until the change of command took place) I was forward deployed in Iraq for nearly 7 months.

*When and why did you enlist?*

I originally enlisted in the Army National Guard back around 1993. A lot of the people in my family had been in, and I knew it was the only way for me to get money for college. The reserve GI Bill as well as the tuition waiver for state schools that is offered through the National Guard in New Jersey was an offer that was hard to refuse. When I joined I don't think I, or anybody at the time, would have imagined that we would be involved in an occupation where nearly half of the deployed force was reservists and national guard (OIF3 rotation will be 43%). So I figured, for one weekend a month, it's not a bad deal.

I also wanted to get out of my neighborhood, and make a little money, so the chance to go away for training and travel while getting paid was a plus.

In the winter of 2002, I transferred from the Army National Guard into the Navy Reserves, where I am still serving as a Corpsman. I switched over to get out of my former position as an 'Infantryman' because I could not do that job anymore. I had grown too much personally and politically in the time since I had first enlisted, I could not see myself carrying a rifle and being an occupier. I did not want to guard checkpoints, search homes and shoot at people. My plan did not work out. Since I was an EMT and had been through the Army's Medic course as well, I was able to come into the Navy as a Hospital Corpsman. But, perhaps because of my Infantry background and other training, I was immediately assigned to work with the Marines. In the end, I found myself not in a hospital somewhere, but on the frontlines of an occupation doing exactly what I had tried to avoid.

*What types of things were you told to do that we're not hearing about here?*

It was a pretty miserable and complicated experience, some days were more agonizing than others. As a Corpsman I was able to avoid many situations that my Marines either relished or did not refuse. I was witness to the detention and mistreatment of civilians, there were several incidents of people in my Battalion shooting civilians, but things like that shouldn't really surprise anyone with all the detailed coverage of Abu Ghuraib and the recent incursions into Fallujah. Some of it was investigated, but most of the time it was just ignored. That kind of stuff was just so common, though not always as sensational or as well documented as the abuse at Abu Ghuraib. On one of my trips to drop off a detainee at the jail, the Senior Interrogator told us not to bring them in any more. 'Just shoot them' he said, I was stunned, I couldn't believe he actually said it. He was not joking around, he was giving us a directive. A few days later a group of Humvees from another unit passed by one of our machine gun positions, and they had the bodies of two dead Iraqi's strapped to their hoods like a couple of deer. One of the bodies had exposed brain matter that had begun to cook onto the hood of the vehicle, it was a gruesome, medieval display. So much of what I experienced seemed out of control, I saw so little respect for the living and almost none for the dead, and there was almost no accountability.

*How did the war and occupation take its toll on the city? What did you see?*

My unit did not go into the 'city' during the brief spring offensive that began after the two U.S. contractors were hung from the bridge, we operated in the 'suburbs' and villages to the south and east of the city. Other than that short incursion, there weren't really many U.S. forces going into the city at all, it was considered a 'RED' zone and was to be avoided, until the incursions last month. What I did see of the surrounding areas was pretty much what I had expected, extreme poverty and a crippled infrastructure that was unable to provide for most peoples basic needs. Most of the destruction that I saw was due to U.S. attacks during the initial Gulf War and subsequent sanctions that lasted for a decade, during which there was continued air bombardment. Many of the facilities that were hit during the 90's included electrical plants, schools and water treatment facilities that were not legitimate targets. The Iraqi people are still suffering from the effect of such actions.

*You said that you joined the military mainly for economic reasons. Was this the*

(**Ft. Sill** *continued from page 1)*

I did last week along with seven other members of Voices in the Wilderness, Camilo Mejia can only be seen by a small group of approved visitors. Neither is it possible to write to him without prior approval from the military. For the time being, he is under wraps, quarantined like a deadly virus.

From the point of view of a military that depends on a compliant corps, Mejia is in fact dangerous. For soldiers, who presently have so much to lose by their participation in the military – life, limb, relationships, mental health – his willingness to look war in the face and to examine its distortions could well be infectious.

His ultimate decision to choose a path of humaneness and sanity make him a lively example to the thousands of women and men currently active in the US military or in the military reserves and whose minds are prone to the same kind of reflection.

While Camilo Mejia is clearly an example to people who wish to say no to this war, perhaps he can also be an example to soldiers returning from Iraq. Like Mejia, these soldiers have to contend with their participation in this brutal occupation. For some, confronting their experiences is a matter of life and death. For others, it is part of trying to save a marriage, and Mejia's words and actions since returning from Iraq point a way that leads from distortion and dissolution to clarity and wholeness. CP

*David Smith Ferri lives in Ukiah, California. He recently returned from a five day vigil organized by Voices in the Wilderness.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*case with a lot of your fellow soldiers* ?

When I was in the National Guard it was certainly true that most of the people were there for the college money, and that's tragic since many working class kids trying to get an education are now forward deployed in Iraq, in combat, not in college. It was a little different with the Marines, certainly a few were lured by the G.I. Bill, but I found they were more likely to really believe in what we were doing and to want to be in combat. There were a few who had reservations before going over, and their numbers increased as they saw the terrible contradictions of this occupation, but most were not able to challenge the set of ideas that they had adopted in Boot Camp and via the media campaign in the lead up to the war. Some guys really believed that they were defending America and bringing democracy, they obeyed their orders without question and bought into Democratization, WMD and 9/11 connections as justification for this war, all of which have been proven to be false.

*From your experiences, what can you tell us about the armed resistance to the occupation?*

Well, it is certainly much better organized than at first suspected. Everyone, even the average American, seems to be unable to deny that now. The incursions into Fallujah over the last few weeks have uncovered a solid infrastructure, and they were able to rebound from the incursions with a well-coordinated series of attacks in other areas. And that's just the attacks that make the papers. There are numerous actions carried out by the insurgency on a nightly basis that do not make the news.

During out first two months in Iraq, our base was attacked nearly every night with indirect fire, often these attacks involved 120mm Rockets. Now, if you've never seen one of these, it's about 6ft. long and hard to conceal. The ability to acquire, store and transport these rockets, as well the expertise to devise an improvised launch mechanism should help to illuminate the fact that we are not fighting a few angry Arab teenagers with sandals and an AK-47. They would hit us with as many as 4 or 5 of these at a time, as often as 3 or 4 times a night, and sometimes this would be coordinated with mortar fire as well. They hit us constantly, with near impunity. That's not the work of amateurs. And that's just one Forward Operating Base, there are small bases all over Iraq, many of which get hit with greater frequency and ferocity than that. And don't forget about the Improvised Explosive Devices, or roadside bombs, which are all over the place. You hear about them only when they cause casualties, but there are many more that miss their mark or get detonated by the Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams. You could hear these 'controlled detonations' go off regularly throughout the day. It takes a serious logistical operation and technical training to manufacture and emplace so many I.E.D.s.

*Regarding soldiers who were to be sent off to Iraq, you said that most were not able to challenge the set of ideas that they had been given in Boot Camp. How does this indoctrination at Book Camp happen? What does it do to a new soldier?*

In 'Boot Camp' as well as in Army Basic Training, which I went through, you are taught to obey orders, to act upon the orders of those in charge without thought or question. That's commonly understood, and that kind of training is necessary for a military force to be able to carry out it's objectives, but this all becomes very problematic when you bring in the complications of an occupation and guerilla conflict. The presence of civilians in the battle space makes it difficult for someone trying to 'kill the enemy' to decide when to shoot and when not to shoot. It is not as clean and simple as you have been trained to think, and young inexperienced and freshly indoctrinated soldiers have to confront this first hand, often realizing the impropriety and consequences of their actions too late. Newer, younger soldiers are less likely to have the confidence and perspective to be disobey an improper order, such as to shoot civilians. It does not help that such directives often come from senior commanders, as we have heard lately coming out of the 'imbedded media' reports from Fallujah, but again that's nothing new. I do not blame the soldiers though, they are being thrown into the meat grinder, and they want to come home alive, I know I did. Also, you have to remember that even if someone receives an order that is clearly 'illegal' according to the Geneva Convention, military law or their own personal or religious morality, it is very difficult to speak out or act against your orders. For one thing, you can and most likely will be punished under military law, even if you were doing the right thing. Although there is a formal justice system in the military, things are often settled at the lowest level, in many cases you will be judged and punished by your own Company Commander who usually has his own interest at heart. Besides that, in speaking out, you are dissenting and breaking out of the group, you are being an individual and turning against the team. This may seem like a insignificant point to most people, but when you have trained side by side with the same group of people, often for years, and having fought and faced death together, it is not insignificant. The people in your unit are in many cases all you have, they are all that keeps you going, so committing an act that will surely be seen as a betrayal is not something most are not willing to do. There are no reliable mechanisms for protecting and investigating the cry of dissenters. And people are not trained in Boot Camp or Basic Training to be whistleblowers, they are taught to be team players, and that's most likely what they will do when confronted with such situations, though they may be plagued with guilt over their actions for the rest of their lives.

***On one of my trips to drop off a detainee at the jail, the Senior Interrogator told us not to bring them in any more. 'Just shoot them' he said.***

*What made you decide to speak out against the war and the occupation? What have been your activities, and do you face any consequences from the military for speaking out?*

I knew that our justifications for going to war were bogus even before I went, and I was clear about that with my family and friends, seeing the impact of the occupation first hand and experiencing some of the contradictions sealed it for me- I knew I had to speak out. But admittedly, it took me a few months really to make sense of things and collect my thoughts enough to talk to people about it, it was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tough at first. I started by going to anti-war vigils, with a sign that said 'Iraq War Veteran Against the War', and just standing there. It was great because it gave me a chance to be visible and send a message about how I felt, without having to talk to people about stuff, the first month or so I really didn't talk to anyone about it except close friends. Gradually I broke into going to more events and meeting more people who helped me build myself into what was going on in the area, as far as anti-war activities, I also joined veterans for peace. Lately I have been writing a lot about how I feel about the occupation and I have committed to give some presentations about the costs of war, my experiences and why we should continue to build the movement to end the occupation. As far as consequences, I have not suffered any yet. From what I understand, service members even while on 'active duty' can participate in any social and political activism they want, just not in uniform. I am now back in 'reserve status' so it's even less of an issue. Actually, I often wear the top part of my desert camo uniform to make it a bit clearer for people where I am coming from, it usually helps to deflate the arm-chair imperialists that drive by the vigil- and since I am not wearing the whole thing there's nothing the military can really do.

*Are you in touch with other antiwar soldiers who feel the same need as you do to speak out? A serious movement against the war and occupation by soldiers who actually served in Iraq could be a hugely important factor in trying to end this thing. What do you think the potential is for a movement like this?*

I have met several Iraq war veterans who are against the war, but not all of them are ready to talk about it with people who have not been there, and not all of them feel that they can really articulate their feelings yet. It's a process, and everyone goes through it in a different way. Some people are more prepared to come right back and challenge all the notions of loyalty and patriotism that they have been fed, even if they do disagree with the war, but it's hard to do that when you have participated in the occupation. As veterans we have a direct connection to this, the occupation in Iraq is part of our personal history and often it is a painful one that involves loss, disillusion and guilt. To work through all of that, and then challenge the 'common' notion of the patriot as someone who blindly supports their government isn't easy, but it is something that we have got to do. I feel we owe it to everyone that's died over there to speak the truth. I think that a serious movement against the occupation should certainly include veterans, the people who have seen things first hand, and we do bear some responsibility for having carried out our country's bad foreign policy. But I do not believe that the burden falls exclusively, or even predominately upon our shoulders. Last time I went to the Saturday vigil, one of the organizers came up and thanked me for attending. She then proceeded to tell me that I was, in effect, the crowning jewel of their vigil--I think there's some truth in this. I do believe that as Veterans, we lend a sort of credibility to the anti-war movement, but we should not have to be the vanguard. I think that there are many people in this country who 'disagree' with the war in Iraq, but seem to me to be far too comfortable, and who appear to be doing little if anything to stop it. I think there is tremendous potential, and perhaps we can serve as a catalyst of sorts, but it's the masses of comfortable, sheltered Americans that will decide whether they are willing to struggle or not.

*How should activists against the war approach antiwar soldiers? What can we do to build healthy bridges, and how can the civilian antiwar movement make itself more welcoming to soldiers who feel like they want to do something about the war and occupation?*

I think the real danger lies in people absolving themselves of responsibility, and looking to veterans for leadership and action, not of idealizing them. I feel it is crucial that people (non-veterans) take some personal responsibility for what's going on in Iraq, whether you voted for our current president or not, you are complicit in the administrations agenda by your silence and inaction. Every day that you do nothing is another day you have given them your consent to continue the occupation. Building bridges with service-members who oppose the war is important, and I encourage it, but it's not something that many people currently organizing such activities tend to be good at. I find that many people in the antiwar movement to be 'dogmatic' and way too forceful with pushing their own analysis and positions. This is a generalization of course, but I don't think it's an unfair one, and it's an important point. You cannot beat people over the head with your politics, not if you want them to keep working with you, especially with people who may still have notions of patriotism and nationalism that you find 'jingoistic' and distasteful. If you find a service-member who is against the war, that's got to be enough of a commonality to start with, you have to give people time to grow into a deeper understanding.

To accept that your country has a brutal history and ongoing agenda of imperialism is not always easy, give service-members you encounter information about this, but most importantly give them the chance to adjust to these ideas and deal with the fact that they have also been an instrument in such a campaign- this can take a long time and it's something that many will never fully accept. Having an open and accessible organization is important, and be visible, make your presence known so that returning service-members can find you and get involved. I stumbled upon the local anti-war group by accident. And remember, particularly in your initial interactions with a veteran, not to intimidate them by asking them to talk publicly about their experiences or inquiring as to whether or not they 'saw a lot of combat' or 'shot anyone'. You may be talking to someone only weeks off of the battlefield, who needs time to process their experiences, and who might not return to work with you if prodded in this way.

I continue to return to work with my local anti-war coalition, week after week, and have committed to talk publicly against the war, and about my particular experiences. This is largely because they were accessible and undemanding, they were clear in their message against the occupation but in support of the troops, and they were genuine, unpretentious people. They have demonstrated their ability to be organized, consistent and reliable, and have been successful in getting many veterans to work with them. And, though movement building is a long and laborious process with varying local dynamics, I think people willing to organize and act against the occupation should certainly take some of this into consideration. CP

*Jim Talib can be reached at jimtalib@yahoo.com.*

*Derek Seidman is coeditor of Left Hook.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# The Marines or Jail: *Take Your Pick, Young Man*

## By Ron Jacobs

If life is a poker game, Rube (name changed) was one of those p1ayers who was never dealt an exceptionally good hand but played well with what he had. A bluff here and the right bet there, if you know what I mean. He was arrested on his 17th birthday for smoking pot in some small town outside Albany, New York. The judge, in all his benevolence, gave him the choice of four years in juvenile detention or two in Vietnam with the Marines. Rube chose Vietnam.

That was the summer of 1967. After an accelerated six weeks of boot camp he found himself in the jungle forward of Danang. His was a standard soldier's story with just a bit of a twist. Fire, heat, blood, death. And dope. Rube would laugh every time he lit up a big pipe load of the red Vietnamese pot. Some sentence, he'd grin. Busted for pot in the States and being paid to smoke it in Vietnam. It wasn't until he got to Saigon for a little "rest and recreation" that he tried heroin and fell in love. Eighteen months and a hell of a habit later, his tour was over. What else could he do? He pulled an ace from the pile and requested another year in Nam. The killing machine was chewing up bodies at an increased rate and loved volunteers. He got his extension.

By the time his second tour was up, Rube was committed to a life with heroin. The Marines let him go in San Diego and Rube headed to the Bay Area. After six months in the Haight, he went east to New York City and the Lower East Side. He found a job at the Fillmore East rock club where he sold dope on the side to keep his supply steady.

After the club folded in 1971, Rube hopped trains back to California. He ended up in the Santa Barbara switching yards. While buying breakfast in town one morning he ran into some folks who would become his family. Camping on the beach and smoking a lot of weed, the endless summer really was. When the rains came, they pooled their cash and headed up to Berkeley. After trying their luck on Telegraph Avenue for a few months, his friends went back to Santa Barbara and Rube split for Alaska with a pouch full of acid. Once in Fairbanks he hooked up with a buddy from Vietnam and sold it all. Then he headed into Denali forest for a few weeks. When the nights grew cold, Rube bought a ticket for California, stuck around for a couple of months and then headed to Oaxaca. By the time I met him, Rube had been following the same routine for a half dozen years. He had tried to live the so-called straight life while in love with a woman who grew tired of his nomadic life, but the nine to five routine just didn't sit with his nature. Last I heard, he was back in prison for heroin possession.

A couple of news items in the past couple weeks caught my attention. One was a brief article on the CNN website about a young man being given the choice of jail or the military by a judge whose court he was in. I don't remember the young man's offense or his decision, just the general story. The other item was also about the military and its need for young warm bodies to fit into its uniforms. The Boston Globe ran an article by staff writer Charlie Savage (11/29/04) that described military recruiters' tactics in two different high schools in Maryland and Virginia. Recruiters relentlessly target one of the schools, where the student body is composed of mostly working class youth. The other, a school with a more upscale enrollment, is virtually ignored, according to the article. The truthfulness of the article was somewhat amazing given its source, but only strengthened the argument made by Steve Earle in his song "Rich Man's War."

***Some sentence, he'd grin. Busted for pot in the States and being paid to smoke it in Vietnam.***

For those of us who grew up during the Vietnam War and draft, the first scenario is a familiar one. At least a couple of my buddies ended up in the military because they were busted for drugs or some other violation of the law and were given the choice of prison or the marines. The second scenario isn't too far from the military's standard operating procedure either. Even during the military draft, the men who ended up doing most of the dying were from working class and poor backgrounds. There was even a plan built into the draft system known as "Channeling." The purpose of this plan was to justify the deferment of college bound young men, undergraduates and post graduate students as being in the larger national interest. Unmentioned was the fact that these men came from backgrounds that usually included higher incomes and better education. Indeed, their numbers also included most sons of members of Congress, the officer corps, and many civil servants, not to mention the sons of CEOs and their administrative cohorts. The other side of this plan was called "Project 100,000." Its purpose was to bring into the service via the draft those young men who scored the lowest on the Armed Forces Qualifying test (AFQT)—the test given to alSl men and women who wish to join the military. Although the Defense Department claimed that Project 100,000 was designed to give these young men a chance to benefit under the regimen of the military, the reality is that these men usually ended up on the frontlines before most everyone else.

According to the Globe article, the current recruiting methods reflect this class bias. In fact, so do the casualty figures coming out of Iraq. When I talk with my son and his friends, most of them feel untouched by the war on Iraq. Even if they oppose it, most of them have no human connection to the bloodshed being perpetrated in their name. The stories of veterans of previous war only mean so much. After all, they're from the history books. Perhaps as more Iraq war vets began to tell their stories, the reality of that war-ravaged landscape will become clearer to the young men and women of our country.

As it does become clearer, I certainly hope that they will refuse to allow themselves or their friends to participate in this war or any future ones. If the timing works out, the popularization of such a sentiment could well end the draft before it begins. I will certainly do my part. CP

*Ron Jacobs is the author of The Way the Wind Blew, the best history of the Weather Underground. He lives in Vermont.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## *Coups and Rumors of Coups*

# Are the Strategists of Tension at Work in Bolivia?

### By Forrest Hylton

In the 1970s, after Italy's 'Hot Autumn' of student and proletarian strikes, which far exceeded the reach of the Communist Party (PCI) and the trade unions, the CIA, in conjunction with an assortment of industrialists, politicians, generals, intelligence chiefs, and fascist paramilitaries grouped together in a secret society called P-2, helped implement a "strategy of tension" by subcontracting terrorist attacks and attributing them to the ultraleft. The goal was not so much to de-legitimate the latter as to target the moderate PCI, whose Eurocommunist theories about the parliamentary road to socialism were informed by the legitimate fear of a US-backed coup like the one that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. By the mid-1970s, the PCI offered to contain the growing crisis and control the ultraleft. This scared the far right. The "strategy of tension" was designed to create a climate of fear and instability — through terror — that would scare people away from the center-left, which could practically taste electoral victory. It was a bloody strategy, in that the slaughter of civilians was intrinsic to its success. One of the most infamous incidents of the period was the 1979 Bologna bombing, in which eighty people died.

In 1980, two of the men responsible, Stefano della Chaiae and Pier Luigi Pagliai, played leading parts in the brutal "cocaine coup" that brought General Luis García Mesa to power in Bolivia on the back of foreign mercenaries, cocaine barons, and the Brazilian military. As in Italy, the principal "threat" in Bolivia came not from the ultraleft, but from the steady ascent of a center-left coalition (UDP) dedicated to reform and "responsible management" of capitalist crisis.

One of the UDP's most capable leaders, writer and orator Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz — who, as Senator, had initiated a "trial of responsibilities" against former dictator General Hugo Banzer Súarez — was "disappeared." In addition to working to end government impunity, Quiroga had authored a bill that led to the nationalization of Gulf Oil in 1969, and he symbolized a tradition of resistance (the 'national-popular') that was mistakenly thought to have been vanquished after Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's plans for a neoliberal order were implemented by President Victor Paz Estenssorro in 1985-86.

## Current Events

Times have changed, of course, and Bolivia today is not what it was twenty-five years ago. Yet a surprising and unusual series of dinamitazos, or dynamite attacks, rocked La Paz on November 15, 17, and 24. The last was blamed on the Bolivian National Liberation Army (ELN-B), which, according to antiterrorist "theory," is an offshoot of its Colombian parent organization. Predictably, Hernán Aguilera Aparicio and Zacarías Tiburcio Mamani, accused of belonging to the ELN-B, were rounded up on November 25, though they proclaimed their innocence. Mamani supposedly "confessed" (presumably under torture) to belonging to the ELN-B, but the General Commander of the National Police, Coronel David Aramayo, confirmed that Aguilar Aparicio had worked for the rightwing Banzer-Quiroga government (1997-2002) for three years as a member of the staff for Trade Union Affairs under the Vice-Ministry of the Interior. His job was alternately to spy on and negotiate with trade union leaders. Curiously, while Aguilera Aparicio was sent to San Pedro to await trial on charges of terrorism on November 26 (he asked to for capital punishment, which does not exist in Bolivia, should evidence prove him guilty be found), Mamani was set free, though he is to be charged with complicity with terrorism. Judge William Dávila asked prosecutor Salomón Paniagua for evidence of Mamani's involvement in terrorism, which Paniagua failed to produce.

***The coup rumors seem part of a de-stabilization plan shrewdly manipulation by the Mesa administration to warn against the consequences of radical direct action.***

The dinamitazos came on the cusp of coup rumors first launched by President Mesa, then amplified by Evo Morales and MAS, and ratified by the Permanent Human Rights Assembly. Who was accused of plotting? According to Bolpress, one of Bolivia's two independent news agencies, retired and active military officials, factions of the MNR loyal to Sánchez de Lozada, Evo Morales and fractions of MAS, and, above all, the US Embassy, which reportedly asked for Mesa's resignation. MAS, Mesa, and the Human Rights Assembly preferred to be vague about who was conspiring, though Evo Morales stated, as ever, that the US Embassy and the MNR were behind it all. (Morales has announced coup plots so often since October 203 that few are still willing to listen.)

The coup rumors appear to be part of a de-stabilization plan that the Mesa administration, supported by MAS and representatives of "civil society," has not authored, but has shrewdly manipulated to warn against the potentially disastrous consequences of radical direct action. The dinamitazos — aimed at Mesa's TV station (PAT), the Officers' Circle, and the Ministry of Defense — weakened the already fragile illusion of executive authority and control. The dynamite attacks had a peculiar quality to them, though — there were no civilians in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

harm's way, and there was no infrastructural damage to speak of. Violence was kept to an absolute minimum of technological sophistication. (Compare this to the murder of Danilo Anderson in Caracas on November 19, in which two C-4 car-bombs were detonated by a cell phone.)

Hardly what one would expect from a group (whose very existence remains in doubt) ostensibly trying to emulate the Colombian ELN, whose attacks on oil pipelines raised the cost of doing business in Arauca and Sucre/Bolívar to such an extent that in 2001, George W. Bush approved $94 million of training and equipment for a special battalion to protect the pipeline. Compared to political violence in much of the world today, the dinamitazos in La Paz were decidedly low-intensity, designed to send a message that did not depend on killing and maiming bystanders, or doing significant damage to infrastructure. That fact alone would suggest that the CIA, rather than being directly involved, was content to let its subcontractors handle the fine print.

## Correlation of Forces

Why should we assume that the left had nothing to do with the attacks? Isn't dynamite the traditional weapon of choice for insurgent Bolivian miners and community peasants? In the first instance, small group terrorism has never been a strong tendency on the Bolivian left, having failed even more spectacularly here than elsewhere-all such groups tend to be infiltrated by government informants from the very moment of their genesis.

Secondly, as Álvaro García Linera, a leading Bolivian political analyst and former commander of the Guerrilla Army of Túpaj Katari (EGTK), has pointed out, "At present, the Bolivian left is participating in a scenario that the left itself has opened with the October insurrection. What reasons would there be to move to armed struggle if the left has a legal political scenario in which it is 'imposing' its program: revision of the hydrocarbons law, a Constitutional Assembly, and a trial for Sánchez de Lozada?"

That, precisely, is the rub. To reverse course and drop the October agenda would be to court another mass insurrection, and those clinging to power know it. Sánchez de Lozada chose to confront the force of insurgent movements with the forces of state repression, and his fate has become a cautionary tale.

In its discussion of the articles and amendments to the new Hydrocarbons Law (initially approved in October), the lower house of Congress recently approved the fifth article, which reverses Sánchez de Lozada's decrees, enacted in 1996-97 during his first administration, which gave multinational oil companies sovereignty over Bolivian gas and petroleum reserves. Because of the fifth article, the new law, if passed in the Senate, would likely be taken by insurgent social movements as a sign that nationalization is officially on the agenda. Even if it were to be vetoed by Mesa, its legitimacy as a demand would no longer be in question, and the objections of revanchiste regionalists in Tarija (south) and Santa Cruz (east) would be exposed for what they are — a desperate attempt by the part of a well-organized, well-funded, and vocal minority to augment their wealth and power at the expense of the indigenous majority.

***The "strategy of tension" was designed to create a climate of fear and instability — through terror — that would scare people away from the center-left, which could practically taste electoral victory.***

The struggle for political and legal legitimacy is part of any revolutionary process which, in practice, points beyond the limits of the capitalist system. In Bolivia, if demands are not met within the existing framework, which is slowly being altered as a result of the October insurrection, there may well be pressure to create a more radical framework in the short term.

The long tradition of Indian community insurgency, which stretches back to the late eighteenth century, has renewed itself again in the twenty-first century, this time in a largely urban setting, and legal and extra-legal tactics are combined in a flexible, shifting repertoire. Many of the powerful and privileged realize that it is to their advantage to contain popular protest within the formal political arena, where they can at least exert considerable, unremitting pressure. The same can not be said of insurrections.

With municipal elections looming on December 3 — in which Evo Morales, MAS, and the rest of the opposition (Felipe Quispe/MIP, Roberto de la Cruz/M-17) are heavily invested — the Constitutional Assembly, slated to begin in June 2005, seems a long way off. Immediate advantage and factionalism is prioritized by popular caudilllos over long-term strategies for unity. But the ultimate fate of Bolivian gas and petroleum reserves, at least in the medium term, is likely to be decided in the Constitutional Assembly, not the municipal elections or even Congress.

Finally, and most importantly, there is a real commitment, shared by the congressional deputies of neoliberal parties (excepting the MNR), to bring Sánchez de Lozada and his ministers to trial. The commitment is a product of political necessity and the fear of what would happen were the patterns of impunity that have long characterized the behaviour of Bolivian governments to continue. Two of Sánchez de Lozada's cards to avoid a "trial of responsibilities" — bog the process down in the Attorney General's Office or block congressional action — have already proven ineffective, which leaves the third: overthrow Mesa "constitutionally" (just as Mesa, according to the MNR, "overthrew" Sánchez de Lozada constitutionally), and make MIR's Hormando Vacadiez, currently President of the Senate, interim president of the republic.

## The Miami Connection: A Constitutional Coup?

This was the plot announced recently by Bolpress on the basis of information provided by reliable, high-level military

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sources. However, with the exception of Haiti, home to the world's only successful slave revolution, rightwing military coups are no longer an easy sell in the Western Hemisphere, since they cohabit uneasily with the claptrap about democracy and "free and fair" elections that is essential to neoliberal doctrine. Thus the contemporary coup d'etat must be disguised as something else — witness Venezuela in April 2002.

Within the Bolivian context, a "constitutional coup" that put Vacadiaz in power would make eminent sense for Sáchez de Lozada. After all, as we have seen, General Banzer, who ruled first as a counterinsurgent dictator and later as a counterinsurgent democrat, was able to avoid a "trial of responsibilities" as a result of the "cocaine coup" that disappeared Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz. Today's rightwing bloc, insofar as it exists, is much less coherent and unified than yesterday's. That was proven recently when the spokespeople of the Civic Committees of the south (Tarija) and east (Santa Cruz) had the legitimacy of their representation challenged by various groups within those very regions. Some of them, like frontier squatters (colonizadores) and indigenous groups, openly identify with the October agenda.

Though it is impossible to know who was behind the dinamitazos and how deep the coup plotting goes, the consensus is that the attacks point to Sánchez de Lozada's henchmen: former Minister of Defense Carlos Sánchez Berzaín and Sánchez de Lozada's son-in-law, Mauricio Balcazar. Santa Cruz, the geographical and economic heartland of the "cocaine coup," is to be the beachhead, according to El Juguete Rabioso, which spoke with an MNRista deputy about the Miami connection.

According to the source, while Sánchez Berzaín has made occasional visits to Bolivia since his hasty departure on the evening of October 17, 2003, trips to Miami by MNR hardliners have been much more frequent. Sánchez Berzaín is currently employed at a Miami law firm owned by former US Ambassador to Bolivia, Manuel Rocha, a fierce and vocal opponent of Evo Morales and MAS. Sánchez Berzaín is now closely connected to Republican politics in south Florida. He is, and always has been, the strategist for Sánchez de Lozada's dirtiest deeds.

Working out of La Paz, Mauricio Balcazar handles the financing and propaganda operations through his public relations firm, Marketing SRL. A campaign to make Mesa seem corrupt was briefly undertaken, but, for understandable reasons, did not get far. Whether he's corrupt or not is a matter for debate, but it is clear to all that compared to Sánchez de Lozada or Banzer, Mesa is a picture of ethical transparency. Of late, the goal has been to create the impression that Mesa is beleaguered on all sides, unable to negotiate with either the social movement left or the regionalist entrepreneurial right, and that his administration is descending into a "chaos" widely associated with the center-left UDP government (1982-85). Based on declarations from the World Bank, the US Embassy, Petrobras and other petroleum multinationals, the Hydrocarbons Law is depicted as if it would lead inevitably to the economic and political ruin of Bolivia. While the strategy has had limited success in the western highlands, Mesa's popularity is much lower in Santa Cruz than elsewhere.

Could a coup succeed, though? Given the correlation of forces, it doesn't seem likely. While Sánchez Berzaín may have a group of retired military officials and select members of the high command behind him, his support does not run deep in the army. As for the regionalist entrepreneurs, their demands of autonomy and a repeal of the Hydrocarbons Law (which has yet to be enacted!) found no echo in the armed forces, who pronounced in favour of Mesa and national unity. As is so often the case, a coup attempt in Bolivia would depend on the loyalty and consent of colonels and lieutenant colonels, and they have shown no interest in, or inclination toward coup plotting.

Perhaps there are better ways to gauge the effects of coup rumors and dinamitazos. If they stem the tide of popular mobilization by instilling a fear of chaos, they succeed, but if they are seen as futile attempts by the ancien regime to return to power, they fail miserably. Sánchez de Lozada et al. are betting on the former, but they have their work cut out for them. In Bolivia, life is rough for counterrevolutionaries these days. CP

*Forrest Hylton is finishing a book on Colombia for Pluto Press.*

(**OLS** *continued from page 2)*

perous private lives. That's where the Lincoln myth comes in, says Berns, who says Abe is our national poet' whose political speeches should be used to get the youth to become good warmongering neocons."

Leave the last word to Wanniski:

"I'm only frustrated that there seems no point to it, that so much intellectual energy is being spent kicking Old Abe around, but to no apparent end? Should we blow up the Lincoln Memorial?

"I've always interpreted Lincoln as an advocate for constitutional democracy,one who was driven by the idea that if the union approved by the American people (not individual states) could be fragmented by special interests of the states, the Union could be divided and divided and divided again, and there could never be the Union that he preserved and we now continue to enjoy.

"What would Lincoln have said about Yugoslavia? It was the neo-cons who developed the idea of popular sovereignty in their ideological quest to break up the Yugoslav Federation—just as they used all their wiles to fragment the USSR into little bits and pieces, and who now are behind the project of dividing the Ukraine. No kidding, folks. I was part of the Wohlstetter/Kristol combination that surfaced in the 1960s. I know these guys intimately.

"Remember it was Belgrade and Milosevic that cited the Lincoln legacy, the neo-cons who celebrated Wilsonian principles of popular sovereignty. In other words, the neo-cons will use any device they can to project their concept of American imperialism and are not really connected to a Straussian cornerstone. I fought my old pals after the Cold War ended and I saw they had big ideas on how to put all the world under US hegemony, starting with their use of shock therapy and the destruction of the ruble to pulverize the Russian economy. I understood their plan was to blow apart the Soviet Federation, but that it would only cause great pain and suffering to the masses of the people—and that in the end, after fragmentation, the cultural and commercial ties would begin to reknit the federation. Which is what is going on now, including the tugging over the two halves of the Ukraine. (I am, by the way, half Ukraine, half Lithuanian.)

"I know you are not kooks, but most people think Lincoln one of the greatest Americans and figure those who spend their time pulling him down must be kooks. That's just the way it is." CP

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## *Impressions of Syria*

# Fall in Damascus

### By Farrah Hassen

I heard the morning news in a Damascus taxi on the way to work. The radio commentator announced that Tunisia's President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali won an expected re-election to a fourth term in mid-October 2004 by capturing 94% of the vote. The middle-aged Syrian driver looked at me and said with a straight face, "We don't have that in Syria, do we?" He slowed for the traffic light.

"No," he laughed, as we drove by one of the endless billboard images of a stoic-looking President Bashar Al Assad, "our president receives 100% of the vote at the polls!"

The driver's ability to laugh about the Assad family grip on political power typifies the Syrian approach to dealing with the daily realities of life—and the stress that accompanies sharing perilous borders with the "new" Iraq in the East and Israel to the West.

I just spent two months in Damascus working for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and listening to jokes on the street about bloated bureaucracies, interminable traffic congestion, financial woes and political corruption, conditions that could apply to a host of other nations well beyond the third world and Middle East. Even more unique, Damascans have a claim to residing in one of the oldest inhabited cities on earth (those living in Aleppo might contend otherwise), settled around 2500 B.C., where tradition, family, faith and "eating as the national pastime" still remain priorities.

Food in the globalization era usually implies the ubiquitous McDonald's and other exportable US fast food chains, which have even trudged their way onto the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Syrians, however, proudly note the absence of those ubiquitous golden arches on their soil.

In their place, a sea of neon-lit emerald minarets adorning the mostly Sunni mosques dominate the panoramic view of Damascus at night from atop the Qaysoon Mountain. More visible during the day are the churches lining the cobbled streets in the old Christian quarter of Bab Touma (Thomas Gate), representing the Maronite Catholic, Greek, Armenian and Assyrian Orthodox Christian minorities that collectively make up 11% of the Syrian population. An even smaller-sized Jewish community testifies to the thriving religious pluralism that in Syrians' minds distinguishes their country from the rest of the Arab world.

Juxtapose the image of crowds jamming the mosques for Friday prayers with that of bored-looking young men and women walking down the main Damascus streets. Some wear tight denim and knee-length skirts; others prefer more conservative white robes and hijabs. The unifying accessory for both remains the cell phone, ringing to pop tunes.

The implication of young adults roaming the street means high unemployment. Currently, Syria has an official 20% jobless rate. Additionally, the annual population growth rate stands at 2.4%--one of the highest in the Arab world.

While unemployment and poverty have become standard ways of life in Cairo, Riyadh and other densely populated global capitals, the Syrian government has made a priority of finding jobs for newcomers. They created an Agency for Combating Unemployment while raising public sector salaries by 20% in early 2004.

Critics of the Assad regime, including President George W. Bush and the U.S.-based Reform Party of Syria, fixate their grievances on procedural issues. They demand that the government hold free and fair elections and proclaim free speech, press and other rights enshrined in the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In contrast, they remain less vocal about the more substantive rights to universal education and healthcare that Syrians actually enjoy.

The growing internal and external calls for meaningful reforms have forced the Assad government to respond, but not as fast enough to silence the critics. Indeed, shortly after his father, Hafez Al Assad, died in June 2000, the younger Assad who succeeded him pushed to liberalize Syria's traditionally protectionist economy. He released 600 political prisoners and allowed political discussion groups to develop. During the first six months of the so-called "Damascus Spring," pro-democracy and civil society gained new hope that they could participate meaningfully in the Ba'ath party-dominated Syrian society.

After 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, coupled with the declining state of U.S.-Syrian relations following allegations that the Syrian government was developing WMDs and aiding Iraqi insurgents, Syria's reform efforts froze. During a July 2003 filming trip throughout Syria, the intellectuals, professionals and people on the streets whom I met all seemed more preoccupied by the Iraqi war and the horrific images of their dead and wounded neighbors shown by Syrian television and Al Jazeera.

By the fall of 2003, the Israeli lobby convinced an overwhelming majority in the U.S. Congress to pass the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, legislation which punished Damascus for alleged terrorist connections and accumulation of WMDs. In May 2004, President Bush banned US exports to Syria and Syrian flights from entering or leaving US territory, the latter of which still generates laughter among Syrians, most of whom view the sanctions as entrenched in U.S. domestic politics. "Since when did Syrian Air ever fly to the U.S. in the first place?" asked a Damascus-based computer programmer whimsically. Still, while the sanctions don't seem to affect most Syrians directly, a looming concern expressed by one government economist remains the "negative image that


## SUBSCRIPTION INFO

**Enter/Renew Subscription here:**

One year $40 Two yrs $70
($35 email only / $45 email/print)
One year institution/supporters $100
One year student/low income, $30
T-shirts, $17
Please send back issue(s)
_____ ($5/issue)

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

_____

Payment must accompany order, or dial 1-800-840-3683 and renew by credit card. Add $12.50 for Canadian and $17.50 for foreign subscriptions. If you want Counter-Punch emailed to you please supply your email address. Make checks payable to: **CounterPunch**
Business Office
PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they give our country, especially to tourists and potential investors."

While the U.S. government used hostility and threat in dealing with Syria, in the name of "fighting terrorism," the EU opted for using engagement and diplomacy. By mid October 2004, the EU signed the coveted Association Agreement with Syria, giving Damascus greater access to EU markets in exchange for progress on human rights and controlling WMDs. While the Agreement awaits ratification from the EU member states, Syrian officials expect it to cut across all areas of society, from the economy and civil society to the judiciary. In the meantime, as a sign of more institutional changes to come, the once inefficient State Planning Commission has been restructured, and for the first time in 30 years, now tackles civil society issues.

During the weeks leading up to the November U.S. Election, Syrians flocked in record numbers to watch an unedited version of Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11." "I didn't learn anything new about Bush or why he decided to invade Iraq," said one graduate student, reflecting Damascus theatergoers' general review of the film, "but I do pray that it affects the outcome of your election." More cynical folks, like one civil engineer who worked in Algeria during the early 1990s, saw little difference in a Bush or John Kerry victory concerning Middle East policy. "Both Bush and Kerry supported sanctions against Syria, applauded UN Security Council Resolution 1559 [sponsored by the U.S. and France and passed on September 2, 2004, targeting Syria for maintaining troops in Lebanon and interfering in the Lebanese presidential elections] and have always sided with Israel," he said.

Like the aftermath of the U.S. sanctions, Resolution 1559, which the University of Damascus professor called "an attempt to sow discord between the Lebanese and Syrians," only helped unify Syrian public opinion against U.S. policy.

Echoing the government response, many questioned the sincerity of the Security Council in calling for Syria to uphold previous UN resolutions related to the withdrawal of troops from Lebanon, while holding Israel less accountable for continuing to occupy Palestinian territories in violation of Resolutions 242 and 338 and the Syrian Golan Heights in defiance of Resolution 497. Despite increasing foreign pressure on Syria to remove her 14,000 troops stationed in Lebanon, the government has maintained a policy of phased withdrawal, which I could verify in mid-September when I observed a small convey of troops on the highway to Beirut returning back to Damascus. Nevertheless, former CIA Middle East specialist Martha Kessler acknowledged in an October 26 AP story that "Lebanon has really never healed since its civil war…It still has a huge Palestinian community that is deeply disenchanted and disenfranchised. The stability of Lebanon is a big unknown should Syria withdraw."

***"Since when did Syrian Air ever fly to the US?"***

Ultimately, any reservations that Damascans had about a Republican or Democratic presidential victory on November 2 were left outside the guarded door of the American Cultural Center, located across the street from the more fortified U.S. Embassy, which hosted a late evening "Election Returns Viewing Party." Once making it through the metal detector, I passed by a framed copy of an Arabic-translated Declaration of Independence before entering the room, filled with mainly U.S. Embassy staff, a handful of Fulbright scholars and a few well-coiffed Syrian women and men. Some huddled around the flat-screen TV, waiting for CNN to project the latest voting results, while others sampled predominately mayonnaise-based "American cuisine." A cameraman from the U.S. taxpayer-funded Al Hurra (The Free One), an Arabic-language satellite television network directed at Middle Eastern audiences, filmed the event.

Before departing the otherwise uneventful gathering, which stretched into the early morning on November 3 before Kerry conceded defeat, I joined some folks engaged in casual conversation and listened to one Embassy official, who had the chutzpah to suggest that the "U.S. hold elections in Syria to educate the Assad government about what it means to have a two-party system and democracy." Her self-righteous tone wasn't far off from Bush, whose re-election victory upset, but didn't shock, most of my colleagues and Syrian friends who could only say, "God help us all." CP

*Farrah Hassen was the associate producer of the 2004 documentary, "Syria: Between Iraq & And A Hard Place," with Saul Landau.*

**CounterPunch**
**PO Box 228**
**Petrolia, CA 95558**

**The Sights of Summer**
**Glamorous *New* CounterPunch**
**T-Shirts Call 1-800-840-3683**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED